

ON THE SPECIAL

By F. B. Wright

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"Late! Oh, no; not the north bound train! It can't be! Are you sure?"

There was a ring in the voice that caught Hugh Morton's attention. He looked up. The girl in black who had interested him when she entered the waiting room three hours before was at the ticket window, and the agent was explaining that the night train due at Belmar Junction at 10:30 was two hours late. Morton himself was waiting for that train.

"Yes, miss, I'm certain. Just received word. Twelve thirty anyway, and it may be later."

"But the train from Parkerville on the other road gets in at 11:20, doesn't it? Isn't there some train out of here before it comes? Anything—a freight?"

"No; nothing until the fifty-three," answered the man in a surprised tone. He leaned forward to see the girl more plainly, and she drew aside in confusion.

"Thank you. I'll have to wait, then. It doesn't matter at all," she said in a voice whose trembling showed that it mattered very much. Then she went out on the platform, leaving Morton wondering.

Why was she so pale? Why was she so impatient to get away? Why so anxious to leave before the train from Parkerville arrived? He puzzled over the question for awhile and went outside for a smoke. Then he heard a sob from a dark corner. The girl was seated on a truck crying so bitterly that she did not hear Morton as he approached, moved by a generous impulse.

"You are in some trouble? Can't I be of some help?"

The girl raised her head with a start, hurriedly wiping away the tears. "No! It's beyond help—I mean it's nothing."

"There's nothing beyond help. Won't you tell me the trouble? You don't know me, of course, but I hope you can see I'm a gentleman."

The girl seemed to shrink from him. "It's nothing—mere nervousness. It was kind in you to ask, though. I thank you. I would accept if it could do any good."

With an apology for his intrusion Morton moved away. He tramped the platform for awhile and then stopped in the shadow by the station window. He had learned telegraphy years before, and it amused him to read the clicking of the key. There was the best part of a message coming in now. Click-click, click-click-click—"dress—sender—brown hair—twenty-two; sherry up on 12 if there." When the message ended the agent glanced out on the platform toward where the girl was seated. Then he telegraphed back. "Girl here; can't leave; 55 late."

So this was the reason of the girl's agitation, thought Morton. She had committed some crime, poor thing, and the law was on her track; the law, so powerful and relentless; she so helpless and alone. Morton had an instant vision of the slight, graceful figure and the pale face and in that instant made up his mind. He went toward her and spoke in an undertone:

"I've accidentally learned something which concerns you very much. I don't know what the trouble is, but they are coming here after you, and I felt I must warn you."

The girl started up with clasped hands. "Oh, I've been afraid of this! What can I do, what can I do?"

"There's no time to lose. The sheriff will be here in fifteen minutes. You must get away."

"How? There's no chance. Oh, if only my train had been on time!" The girl broke down and sobbed.

"Here! Don't do that. You must keep your nerve, you know." Morton's brain was working quickly. "Listen. If the sheriff doesn't find you here when he arrives he'll think you are in the neighborhood surely, and he'll stop to search the village. That will take him until morning. The next station north is Newboro—fifteen miles. We have over an hour in which to make it. Will you take the chance?"

"Yes—any chance. I haven't really done anything wrong—and if I can escape—"

"Quick, then! Go over to that shed on the other tracks and wait."

The girl disappeared, and Morton sauntered into the waiting room. "I've a bad headache and decided I'd better not travel. Will the hotel be open?"

"Open until 55 comes in."

"Much obliged. Good night."

Morton picked up his satchel and started toward the hotel. Then he doubled across the tracks to where the girl was waiting.

"Hurry! There's not much time to lose," he said. He had noticed that afternoon a hand car on a siding near the street and went to it.

"Help me to push it," he directed. "Easy, though. The agent must not hear."

Together they shoved the car gently along the rails and into the darkness. Far off they heard the whistle of the sheriff's train.

Morton waited until it thundered up to the station. "Now," he cried, "we must push ahead. Their noise will drown ours."

They jumped aboard and, grasping the levers, started off and in a moment were swinging northward under the stars, with the station lights growing fainter in the distance.

The pumping was hard, for the grade was uphill, and for half an hour nothing was heard but the clanking stroke of the levers, the pounding of the wheels and the labored breathing of the

man and woman. The girl looked exhausted, and Morton felt as though there was a glowing furnace in his chest. How long could he last out? he wondered. Then he felt the car run easier, and then—they had reached the crest of the grade and started downward. Morton looked at his watch. It was 12 o'clock.

"We make it now," he said. "You rest."

The girl sank wearily upon the platform, while the car sped through woods and meadows, rattled over bridges and rumbled past walls of rock.

"I wish I could ever thank you," she said, looking up, her face clear in the soft starlight.

"You have thanked me—many times."

"But I mean in words. I don't know what I would have done if you had not helped me. May I tell you why I am running away?"

"You needn't unless you wish. I know you've done nothing wrong. You couldn't."

"I want to tell you. I couldn't bear—at least I mean I want you to understand. It wasn't wrong. I don't think you'll say it was wrong. You see, my mother died a few days ago—and, oh, I loved her so!—and my stepfather hated me. He was cruel to me and cruel to her even at the last. After she was buried he was worse than ever, and yesterday he told me I must leave his house. I was glad to go—only too glad."

I asked him for my mother's true trinkets, things she had had as a girl, a few little bits of jewelry my own father had given her and her picture. She told him on her deathbed they were to be mine. But when I asked for them he refused me; said the law gave them to him. I told him I would take them, and he threatened me with the jail if I did; told me he would have me dragged through the streets like a common criminal.

"Today he left the house for a moment, and I broke open his desk and took them and ran away. I thought I could reach the city before he could catch me, and, once there, he would never find me, and I could live happily alone."

The girl hid her face and cried. Morton longed to comfort her, but he felt it was best to let her have her cry out.

"You are going alone to the city, with no plans, no money, knowing no one?" he asked when she became quieter.

"I can be lost there and safe from him. I can find work. I'm not afraid."

He returned no answer, but the thought of this friendless, innocent, unprotected girl exposed to all the dangers of a great city was more than unpleasant.

The car was slackening speed now, and far up the road were the lighted windows of a station. Morton brought the car to a standstill.

"We must ditch it," he said. And together they lifted and tugged until the machine was down the bank. Then in silence they went on to the station, and Morton bought tickets from a sleepy clerk.

"Would you mind telling me your name?" he asked as they walked together in the darkness.

"Mildred Clarke. I feel as though you knew it, you've been so good, so kind—as kind as a friend could be, if I had one."

Far down the track sounded the whistle of 55.

"Mildred, I want to be more than a friend. You put your trust in me to help you tonight. Won't you trust me longer? Let me help you for all my life?"

The light of the engine fell full upon the upturned face of the girl.

"Yes," she said softly.

Then the night express bore them forward "to that new world which is the old."

Twain's Suggestion.

Mark Twain in his youthful days was a reporter in Carson City. It was his duty one evening to report a meeting of the city council, whose president was a ponderous statesman given to sounding words and intellectual confusion.

A motion was made to expunge from the records a certain matter which the presiding officer was extremely anxious should not become part of local history. The motion, having been seconded, was eagerly passed.

"The matter has been ordered expunged," declared the presiding councilman gravely, "and the clerk will proceed to expunge. It should be effectually wiped out, obliterated and totally destroyed." He paused to notice the effect of his sentence of annihilation.

"Where, gentlemen," he asked, "will you have the expunged matter deposited and placed?"

Mark Twain caught the attention of the councilman nearest him. "Let the expunged matter be worn under the chairman's hat," he suggested. "No one would ever think of looking there for anything."

Major Pond and Bill Nye.

More than one successful lecture star had to thank Major Pond for his start. He had been discrimination and not infrequently sought out and dragged upon the lecture platform an obscure genius who never thought to see himself before the footlights. Such a genius was Bill Nye. When the major found him he was acting as postmaster and editing the Laramie Boomerang over a livery stable. ("Walk down the alley, twist the gray mule's tail, take the elevator immediately!")

Pond persuaded him to try lecturing, and as there proved to be both money and useful publicity in it, Nye was grateful and used for years to remember the major with characteristic notes, one of which had the following exhaustive signature:

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